

His Kingdom of Self-Forgetful Love

Homily for 23rd Sunday Ordinary Time
September 9-10th 2023

There is a gripping scene in the *Beauty and the Beast* when the Beast is about to confess his love to Belle. Cogsworth, the Enchanted Clock looked on with eager anticipation. He knew that if Belle pledged her love to the Beast, presto! The evil spell that hung over the castle would finally be broken. As she clasped hands with the Beast, Belle asked permission to gaze into the magical mirror to see her father. Viewing her father in obvious distress, she dropped the mirror and gasped at his plight. "I've got to go to him!" she sobbed. The Beast responded, "Go to him, then."

Cogsworth later walked into the room with an air of triumphant expectancy as he declared to the Beast, "I must say that things are going swimmingly." His mood changed, however, when the Beast uttered the most significant line in the film. "I let her go." "You did what?" Cogsworth answered, knowing that letting Belle go was taking a colossal risk. If she didn't come back, there may never be another chance to break the horrible curse on him and his Kingdom. So why did he let her go? "I had to," the Beast said. "I love her."

This is what Jesus Christ did for us by creating us with spiritual freedom. He has loved us so much that he took the risk of letting us go, of not forcing us to live in his friendship and abide in his Kingdom. We, like Belle, are free to choose how we will respond to that love - by building our own self-centered Kingdom, like the villain Gaston, or by committing ourselves to building up his Kingdom of self-forgetful love.

It is to help us realize how to commit ourselves to the building of his kingdom of self-forgetful love that today's readings have such wise council.

In the Psalm we hear about the different links that make of the chain of self-forgetful love. Psalm 95 identifies five of these links. They are:

1. worship,
2. thanksgiving,
3. praise,
4. song,
5. joy.

The first link in the chain is worship because God is our maker: The psalm declares: "O come let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our maker"

Worship is then joined to thanksgiving and praise where we delight in who God is – that is praise – and thank him for what he has done- that is to make us his own. The psalm expresses it this way:

”Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving and make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise”.

This then finds expression in the fourth link, which is song: “Come let us sing to the Lord”. The Sunday Mass is replete with music because in song we express our thanks and praise. How wonderful it is to have our choirs back this Sunday and set up in the renovated choir loft. Now remember we don’t have to be professionals. God does not tell us to be opera stars, just to make noise. Psalm 100 begins: “Shout joyfully to the Lord.” Noise level reveals love level. We make more noise praising our hockey teams than praising our God.

The fifth fruit in the chain of self-forgetful love is joy and we declare “let us make a joyful noise to him, the rock of our salvation”. We all crave joy. What blocks it? This Psalm tells us. Only one thing: not the softness and warmth of God’s heart and desire and love for us but the hardness and coldness of our hearts for him. But God did not harden our hearts; we did. Our hearts are in our hands; we can choose. So, he says, “Harden not your hearts.” He offers us a clear road to joy, but repeatedly we prefer our own dark and winding roads to misery. We read in Exodus that the root of the hardened heart is the attitude of fault finding. Always looking for the negative, an outlook on life that is critical - causing bitterness and ingratitude to take root.

And this brings us to the reading from Romans. Here St Paul is teaching that in the kingdom of self-forgetful love the whole of the biblical witness can be summed up in one clause:

“Love is the fulfilling of the law”.

This love is an act of will, not a feeling. Feelings cannot be commanded. That is simply a psychological fact. “I command you to feel compassion for me; I command you to feel happy about my good fortune”—that is like saying, “I command you to stop letting gravity affect your body.” Feelings seem to come from us because they do not come from outside us (even though they are caused by things outside us like slaps or kisses), but they do not come from our will, our choice, from the “I” that takes responsibility for what it does. We can’t help feeling pain when we are hurt, either physically or emotionally; or feeling desire toward whatever appears desirable, whether it really is or not; or feeling aversion to what appears undesirable, whether it really is or not. But “appearances are deceiving,” and it takes prudence, it takes practical wisdom, to distinguish appearance from reality, true goods from false goods, and real needs from felt wants. If sin did not appear in any way attractive, we’d all be saints.

Peter Kreeft, a gifted Catholic writer puts it this way:

It takes the three eyes of the soul, the eyes of faith and hope and love, rather than the two eyes of the body, to see that divine image, that “made in heaven” label that comes on the tush of every newborn baby. This is the one law of the one God for the one life of the one person that is you. [OBJ]

Enter our first reading and Gospel. We need all the help we can get to be actively participate in building the kingdom of self-forgetful love. That is why we need the watchman of Ezekiel. A

watchman was to sound a warning when there was an enemy approaching so the people would be alerted to the danger close at hand. We too need this warning because all around are the enemies of love, Gaston, and his cronies who want to undermine our freedom and keep us bound in attitudes that separate and alienate us from God and each other.

When the Church is living her life as the Lord has ordered her to, as in the Gospel reading today, we will take to heart the call to name lovingly but honestly when another has sinned against us. Nothing more quickly snaps the chain of love than the unwillingness to speak lovingly and listen attentively to times when we wound each other.

Jesus sees this as such an important matter that he gives a method by which we are to lovingly address another who has wounded us. It begins with a one on one. If that can't resolve the matter than we are to take it to another seek the support and intervention of two others. This could be friends, or a counsellor, a priest with whom you try to address matters.

Jesus then says a time can come where the differences are so great that we are to take it to the Church. What does this mean? There can come a point where a person has become so hardened in their attitude that there is nothing more you can do to try and restore the relationship. There is a time when the Church affirms that enough is enough. To treat someone like a tax collector or a gentile doesn't mean that you write them off forever. Because the person who has hurt you has chosen to exclude themselves from the chain of self-forgetful love you need not revisit that situation again and again. How often though we do this. And the cycle is endless, the frustration and confusion the sense of powerlessness can overwhelm and defeat us.

Are we to forgive and pray? Yes, always as Jesus did the tax collectors like Matthew who came to realize the invitation to join Jesus' chain of self-forgetful love.

This brings us to the end of this homily when there is reconciliation, and it is mutually understood how one person has hurt another, the chain of love can be mended. Granted this can take time and much patience. But when it does occur Jesus states that in a distinct way he is amid that relationship because there is agreement on the hurt caused forgiveness is extended, and reconciliation is the result.

We know that Gaston did everything to undermine Belle and the Beast but in the end his selfish love did not win the day. It was Belle's love for her father and the Beast's love for Belle that allowed for love's victory, the victory of self-forgetful love.